Chapter 8

Black Sabbath and the Problem of Defining Metal

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Determining what bands count and what bands don't count as metal is a perennial subject of debate and discussion among metal fans. The answers each fan gives depend largely on the criteria they establish for what heavy metal is. In this chapter, I offer a slightly different approach to the issue. I argue that a particular kind of connection to Black Sabbath is what qualifies a band as metal. A true metal band must be either inspired by Black Sabbath or be inspired by other bands that are inspired by Black Sabbath.

So, is there a specific degree of Black Sabbath influence that qualifies a band as metal? Well, not quite. There are a lot of other factors that affect whether a band is accepted as being metal, some of which depend on the historical context of the music. For instance, consider stoner rock, a genre in which the ideal seems to be to sound like Black Sabbath on *Master of Reality*. Back in the seventies, this music would have been called heavy metal, but today it falls within the realm of rock, pure and simple. The standards of what qualifies as metal are constantly changing.

With respect to "noisiness," a lot of what was considered noisy in the seventies sounds quite settled and radio-friendly in comparison with the thrash metal bands of the 1980s, which again are not as distorted and sonically overwhelming as many extreme metal bands from the 1990s and 2000s.

A different trait, the use of down-tuned guitars and basses, has also developed over the years. On the early Black Sabbath albums, Tony

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Iommi and Geezer Butler pioneered these alternative tunings, which sounded dark and ominous at the time.[1] As a contrast, consider the album *Pineappleskunk*, issued in 2001 by Doug Pinnick from the rock band King's X under the moniker Poundhound. *Pineappleskunk* features guitar and bass that are tuned down to such an extent that the actual pitches are often barely distinguishable.[2] The album is a bit of a borderline case, but listening to it today, I think the music is structurally closer to rock music, pure and simple, in the tradition of Jimi Hendrix, than it is to heavy metal.

Although there is a general emphasis on rhythm structures in metal, the palette of rhythms that are allowed in metal today is so varied that it is difficult to draw sharp boundaries between this palette and, say, today's arsenal of rhythms used in much electronic music (techno, trip hop, drum 'n' bass, and others).

So the bottom line is that I do not think we can specify exact stylistic traits that one has to follow in order to be a metal artist. I do, however, think that for a given heavy metal artist or band, we can trace the reason why the artist is accepted as metal back through the chain of relationships between their music and the music of Black Sabbath. Before I offer some cases in support of this hypothesis, let's first consider a different, but related question: Why do we need categories?

Why Do We Need Categories?

Many rock and metal musicians hate being categorized. They think being identified with a specific genre impedes their freedom of musical expression. If fans come to expect a certain type of music from a band, the band risks upsetting the fans if they choose a new stylistic direction. (This is a justified fear, considering the controversies in connection with the release of Metallica's *Load* or, more recently, Opeth's *Heritage*, Morbid Angel's *Illud Divinus Insanus*, and The Haunted's *Unseen*—and indeed in connection with several Black Sabbath releases, especially after the departure of Ozzy in 1979.) So why do we need to lump artists into genre categories?

The short answer is that music consumers need genres because they like going back to music that does certain things for them, or has certain typical traits. A genre is a category that helps us identify something.

There may be a lot of different hammers of different sizes, shapes, colors, and materials, but if I say "I need a hammer," I just want you to help me find one of these objects that will let me bang a nail into a wall. I would think you were a raving lunatic if you brought me a fish bowl instead. Similarly, if I am browsing in the metal section in a CD store, I expect that there will be a lot of varied music in that section, some of which I will not like, but I do not expect to find Sting or Steely Dan albums stored alongside Slayer and Strapping Young Lad.

The concept of genre can be traced back to Aristotle (384–322 BC), who liked to divide everything in the world (this is not really an exaggeration) into categories, families, sub-concepts, and so on. For any specific substance, he wanted to know if it belonged to the same "genus" as other substances, the same overarching concept. Later in world history, Austrian-Hungarian monk and botanist Gregor Mendel (1822–1884) derived the word "gene" from "genus," because he was advocating the existence of certain entities in organisms that they inherit from their family, and which determine the kind of things the organism can be. But enough etymology.

Metal Conditions?

Defining a genre can be very difficult, but to facilitate the process philosophers often speak of *necessary* and *sufficient* conditions. A necessary condition for being x is something that a thing needs in order to be x. That does not mean that you are automatically an x, if you fulfill the necessary condition. But if you do not fulfill the condition, you are certainly not an x. So, for example, having four sides is a necessary condition for being a square. Anything that is a square must have four sides. But there are some geometrical figures that have four sides but are not squares, such as trapezoids. A sufficient condition for being x, is something that, if a thing fulfills it, makes us sure that the thing is indeed an x. If we can provide conditions for being x that are both necessary *and* sufficient, then we have a precise definition of x. So, for example, having four equal sides and four equal angles are each necessary conditions for being a square. In this case when a figure has both necessary conditions—four equal sides *and* four equal angles—this is sufficient for being a square.

While it's easy and uncontroversial to list the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a square, it's not at all easy or uncontroversial to list the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a metal band. Sufficient conditions for metal might include the combination of energetic double pedaling on the bass drums, growling vocals, or tuned-down guitars and bass. None of these traits, however, is a necessary condition. Why not? Because it is possible to be a metal band and not have any of these traits. For instance, it is not until 1990's *TYR* that double pedaling is heard on a Black Sabbath album.[3] There is a similar use of figures on the toms in "Children of the Grave" from *Master of Reality*, and Sabbath introduced fast, thrash-like tempos on the *Paranoid* album. But just to end the discussion of whether fast tempos and double-pedaling is a necessary condition for being heavy metal, think of the self-titled opening track from the first Black Sabbath album, "Black Sabbath." The song is heavy in the intuitive sense of the word—it is very slow, and sounds like the soundtrack to someone dragging a very heavy object across the ground. "Black Sabbath" is arguably the world's first doom metal song. In fact, the subgenre of doom metal is one of the few metal subgenres that actually *has* at least one necessary condition, namely ultra-slow tempos. Of course, there can be doom metal with a lot of double-pedaling on top of the basic tempo, but still, you pretty much have time to run out and get a beer within each bar.

Tuned-down guitars could, arguably, be a necessary condition within a given historical time, but standards have changed with respect to how much something can be tuned down in the first place and still remain within the realm of plain rock music. So even if alternate tuning is a necessary condition for metal, it is too broad to help us say anything about what metal is in opposition to other genres. Alternate tuning is not a sufficient condition for metal; it is not enough. The same goes for the use of distortion. And if you seriously think that all metal bands use growls, then why are you reading this book?

So, at least if we are talking about heavy metal as a whole, and not about more specific subgenres, it seems that we cannot give a definition in the sense of one or more conditions that are both necessary and sufficient.

All in the Sabbath Family

In music reviews we often read statements like this: "These San Francisco newcomers play a heavy, yet melodic bay area thrash in the tradition of Forbidden." Personally, when I write a review of an album (which I do now and then), the attribution of a certain genre or subgenre label is a point I reach after having associated the music with some specific bands I already know. For instance I may think, "This sounds a bit like early Dream Theater, it has a bit of inspiration from Symphony X from the post-*V* era, and even some vocals that sound inspired by Daniel Gildenlöw from Pain of Salvation," and then begin my review with "this band plays progressive metal in the tradition of Dream Theater and Symphony X, but with a bit of the darker twist of modern progressive rock bands like Pain of Salvation." As you can tell, progressive metal is one of my favorite subgenres, but occasionally I have been assigned to review a band in a genre I knew nothing about in advance, for instance black metal. In the case of the black metal album review, I called up a friend and asked him if he could give me a crash course in the genre. Can you guess what the first thing he did was? Right, he gave me a list of influential artists that characterize what is known as black metal.

Actual cases of the use of a concept have always been one of the best ways to learn to use the concept in question. This is a key part of the language theory developed by Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) in the later part of his life. Wittgenstein not only held that we learn the meaning of a word by using it in specific situations, he also held that the *only* way to understand the meaning of a word is by taking part in a situation where it makes sense to use the word. As with many theories of language, Wittgenstein's philosophy is difficult to defend, if we take it universally. If we think of music, however, the idea makes a lot of sense. It is, in fact, quite difficult, if not impossible to teach people the difference between "major" and "minor" chords, without actually playing the chords for them (even if very exact definitions of the structural differences between these harmonies exist). Likewise, it is impossible for me to give a meaningful description of what makes the first three Black Sabbath albums so different from any other music that came before 1970, without assuming that you have actually heard some of these records. I could write that

the albums broke new ground by being riff-oriented in a way that not even Jimi Hendrix had conceived of, with Ozzy's vocals and the rhythmical figures of both bass and drums accenting the structure of the guitar riff (think of songs like "N.I.B.," "Iron Man," and "Into the Void"), that the bass and drum parts quickly became as important as the guitar parts (something that is a typical trait of heavy metal, even though it is not a necessary condition), that they pioneered downtuned guitar and bass, and so on. But none of this would make any sense to you, if you did not have a sonic reference—in other words, the actual recordings—to listen to.

Wittgenstein further had the idea that the specific cases in which we use some words and concepts relate to each other like a family. Think of the way family resemblance works. I'll bet that in your own family you will not be able to find one single trait that *everyone* in your family shares, apart from the general traits you share with all human beings or with other members of a particular ethnicity. Yet, some people in your family may be a little like someone else in your family, who in turn have traits similar to other people, and so on, thus forming a family resemblance. Wittgenstein held that some words and concepts work this way, "game" for example. According to Wittgenstein, there is nothing that all games have in common. That is, there are no necessary or sufficient conditions for being a game.[4] Instead, what we call games share an overlapping network of characteristics; they share a family resemblance. Wittgenstein would probably have considered "heavy metal" a family resemblance concept in the same way as "game." There are no necessary and sufficient conditions for being metal. Instead, bands we call metal share an overlapping network of characteristics. And in this case the family begins with Black Sabbath.

Black Sabbath as a Prototype for Heavy Metal

So how do you start a new family? According to *prototype theories*, a concept is defined in relation to a prototype, a basic or original instance. There can be varying degrees of resemblance, so sometimes it can be debatable whether the concept applies to a case or not. For example, when we talk about a chair, we normally have a definition in terms of the function of the object, namely that it is something we

can sit on. There are, however, a lot of objects we can sit on that are not chairs, like couches, low tables, and large rocks. When we think of a chair, pure and simple, we have an idea of a very typical object with four legs, a rest for your back, and so on. And it is by resemblance with this "prototype" that we categorize other objects as chairs. Some objects will inarguably be called chairs, even if they don't have four legs, whereas other objects will invite some discussion as to whether we can really call them chairs (is a "Fatboy" a chair?). This is slightly different from Wittgenstein's theory, because we actually have one set of traits that everything else belonging to the concept resembles. We still have to know other members of the "family," though, because we need to learn how much and in which ways cases can differ from the prototype.

I would argue that all musical genres have prototypes, and that Black Sabbath is the first, and one of the most important prototypes of heavy metal. It is impossible to say exactly what features a band must have in common with Black Sabbath in order to be called metal, but it is safe to say that every heavy metal band has some tie to Black Sabbath's music—if not by direct inspiration, then at least by inspiration from other bands that are directly inspired by Black Sabbath.

As previously mentioned, doom metal has its roots in the song "Black Sabbath" and slow tempos on songs such as "War Pigs," "Keep It Warm," and "After All (The Dead)," just to choose some examples from different eras.

Thrash as we know it today would not be what it is without eighties thrash metal artists such as Metallica and Slayer, but the raw, blunt, and fast energy of the genre can be traced back to Sabbath songs such as "Paranoid" and "Symptom of the Universe." The latter even has the same dark, alternately minor-scale and disharmonic chord pattern of much later thrash metal (if we ignore the quiet, Doors-like section that ends the piece). Try comparing the rhythm structure of the Metallica song "Master of Puppets" with that of "Paranoid," or try comparing one of Slayer's slower songs with "Symptom of the Universe" and you'll hear what I mean.

Death metal is, of course, dependent on the use of growls. But you can still draw clear lines from the type of unison band riffs (where guitar, bass, drums, and vocals follow each other) in death metal to Black Sabbath's performances on *Paranoid* and *Master of Reality*. One could also argue that the dark, ominous atmosphere of not only

death metal, but also gothic metal, black metal, and, again, doom, all began in the music of Black Sabbath.

Progressive metal has championed the use of long, eclectic songs with lots of contrasts between soft, melodic passages, incorporation of different styles of music, and heavy sections. On their first album Black Sabbath played with such eclectic structures in "Wicked World," and they took these experiments to new levels on songs like "Under the Sun/Every Day Comes and Goes" from *Vol. 4*, "Killing Yourself to Live"[5] and the title track from *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*, "Dirty Women" from *Technical Ecstasy*, and "Air Dance" from *Never Say Die!* just to name a few.

Power metal may in general have Iron Maiden as its main prototype, but actually the first two releases from Black Sabbath's Dio-era, *Heaven and Hell* and *Mob Rules*, were an influence on Iron Maiden, and remain important references for today's power metal bands. Iron Maiden's Bruce Dickinson has acknowledged that "Children of the Sea" from *Heaven and Hell* was an inspiration for "Children of the Damned," and there are similarities between the main riffs of "Country Girl" from *Mob Rules* and the Maiden song "To Tame a Land."

Born Again was panned by a lot of fans and critics at the time, but actually the album was genuinely inventive. "Zero the Hero" was an influence on Guns N' Roses (who claim the song was an inspiration for "Paradise City"), and the track's steadily pulsing, hypnotic groove sounds like an ancestor of later acts such as Tool and OSI. "Disturbing the Priest" from *Born Again* is a very clear source of inspiration for the later psychedelic progressive metal pioneers Psychotic Waltz. Even the vocals on "Disturbing the Priest" sound like something straight off the first two Psychotic Waltz albums. Adding to the evidence, Psychotic Waltz actually recorded a cover of "Disturbing the Priest" for a special edition of their 1993 album *Into the Everflow*.

It's not clear if any grunge should count as metal, but two of the most metal-sounding grunge bands, Soundgarden and Alice in Chains, have clear connections to Black Sabbath. Soundgarden were much inspired by the sound on *Master of Reality*; they even did a cover of "Into the Void" for the EP *Satanoscillatemymetallicsonatas*. If you listen to Alice in Chains with *Sabotage* in mind, you get the feeling that this album is part of their heritage, in particular the eerie vocal harmonies on "Megalomania" and "Am I Going Insane (Radio)." Actually, the groove of some heavier parts of *Sabotage*, such as

"Hole in the Sky," also foreshadows the first Alice in Chains album, *Facelift*.

Let's not forget *Dehumanizer*, Sabbath's sort-of comeback album from 1992 (reuniting the *Mob Rules* line-up after several years with Tony Iommi as the only original member). The album is a reference for some of the bands that emerged in the mid-1990s, especially Nevermore and Symphony X. Both bands combine power metal and thrash with theatrical atmospheres, raw high-register vocals, and progressive technical prowess (although with very different outcomes), all prominent features on *Dehumanizer*. The media critique running through songs like "Computer God" and "TV Crimes" also sounds like an inspiration for the lyrics on Nevermore's "Poison God Machine," and Symphony X even have a song called "Dehumanized" on their *Iconoclast* album.

As is well known, Black Sabbath introduced the use of occult and satanic themes to the lyrics and imagery of metal. In preparation for a lecture in which I discussed certain types of album covers, I realized that the reason why a particular cover, the one for the album *Behind the Black Veil* by The Shadow Theory, still looked like a heavy metal cover, even though it just pictured a slightly spooky-looking old house in twilight with a ghostlike figure in front of it, was that it conjured the imagery of the first Black Sabbath album cover. Other influential metal images from Sabbath include the demons on the cover of *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath* and the weirdly malfunctioning mirror on the cover of *Sabotage*. And last but not least, it was Ronnie James Dio who popularized the classic metal horns gesture at Black Sabbath's concerts in the early 1980s.

Of course, there are some problems with letting the connection to Black Sabbath's music define an artist as belonging within the realm of heavy metal. For example, even though "The Wizard" sounds like something Queens of the Stone Age could have written today, that hardly makes Queens of the Stone Age a metal band. As we've noted, standards change concerning how aggressive, noisy, and down-tuned music can be without being called metal.

There is also the question of who came first, when we try to determine the influence of Black Sabbath. Even though you can hear similarities between the Sabbath releases with Tony Martin on vocals and metal bands that were in vogue at the time these albums came out, that does not make Black Sabbath an influence on these bands in

virtue of these releases alone. For example, it wouldn't make any sense to say that "Virtual Death" from Sabbath's *Cross Purposes* (1994) was an influence on Alice in Chains' "Junkhead" from their album *Dirt* (1992). It is also highly unlikely that Black Sabbath had an influence on, say, Rage Against the Machine via the song "Illusion of Power," which featured a rap by Ice-T, since the album *Forbidden* that included the song came out in 1995, more than two years after Rage Against the Machine's debut album.

Go Forth and Find New Prototypes

In today's metal community, Black Sabbath have been, if not replaced by, then supplemented with, other prototypes, but these prototypes themselves all have important direct or indirect connections to Black Sabbath. No matter which subgenre we consider, we have the same problems when trying to define the genre, as we have with defining, say, heavy metal in general: There will always be certain members of a genre that are located there dependent on historical factors (the standards at a given time), and members that we are not quite sure belong there (borderline cases that are very far from the prototypes of the genre). Still, it makes sense to use genre concepts because there will always be artists and bands that inarguably belong within a specific genre, and just as importantly, artists that certainly do *not* belong in the given category.

So let the debates continue. And may you enjoy refining the definitions of heavy metal for years to come!

Notes

1. At least from *Master of Reality* and onward. The use of drop-tunings on the first two albums is debated. Martin Popoff says that the down-tuning started on *Master of Reality*. See his *Black Sabbath: Doom Let Loose* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2006), 57; Paul Wilkinson says that "Warning" from the debut album was the first song with down-tuning. See his *Rat Salad: Black Sabbath The Classic Years 1969–1975* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2006), 51.
2. The songs "Somedays" and "Jumpin" are representative examples.

3. If double-pedaling is used on previous Black Sabbath albums, it is done very subtly.
4. This is a point of discussion. One could argue that all games fulfill the necessary condition of involving certain rules that you have to follow in order to play the game, whether you are playing chess or playing with dolls.
5. The track is actually a suite including two other short songs, "You Think that I'm Crazy" and "I Don't Know If I'm Up or Down."